[Book review of:] Faith in a Pluralist Age, edited by Kaye V. Cook

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Kaye V. Cook, ed., *Faith in a Pluralist Age*. Cascade Books, Eugene, 2018. 135 pages. ISBN 978-1-5326-0996-1.

The Austrian-American sociologist Peter Berger (1929–2017) has become well-known for his studies into the social construction of reality (together with Thomas Luckmann) and secularization. While he still adhered to a mainstream secularization paradigm in the 1960s (more modernization = less religion) he soon began to observe that religion in a modernizing world does not so much disappear as assumes a different shape. According to Berger, it is pluralism rather than secularization that drives religious change. In the opening essay of *Faith in a Pluralist Age*, possibly the last text that Berger ever wrote, he explains this new paradigm. Pluralism happens on two levels: (i) religious pluralism as commonly understood—that is, the more or less peaceful coexistence of several religions (and, for that matter, non-religious worldviews) in the same society; and (ii) the coexistence between religious discourses and "a powerful secular discourse, originally rooted in modern science and technology" (4). This latter discourse derives its power mainly from the enormous success of science with regard to making our lives more pleasant and secure.

This double plurality of modern societies means that believers constantly encounter fellow citizens who are like them in almost all aspects, and yet look at life differently. This living together and its concurrent "cognitive contamination" may lead to the relativization of faith or to a reaction in the form of fundamentalism. At the same time, the confrontation with the dominant secular discourse of politics and science will lead the faithful to deal with different relevance structures in daily life. Almost instinctively they learn to move between religious and secular domains—for example, when they pray for healing but also make use of medical science.

The consequence of this living together in different domains with fellow citizens of every religious and irreligious variety is not so much a decline of religion *tout court* as the crumbling of orthodoxies, the emergence of individualized styles of religion, and the transformation of churches into voluntarist organizations. In general, we are much more than our ancestors aware of the fact that every life option is a choice, and therefore we are much more susceptible to constant self-reflection and religious mobility.

According to Berger, a Lutheran himself, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Pluralism opens up the space for religious freedom, both by protecting it and by inviting us to reflect on our views and explore alternatives. While the protection of "secular" space may be defended theologically by Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, separating the secular from the religious, the constant challenge offered by a pluralist society also stimulates self-reflection and thus

allows us to cling to our beliefs more personally and more profoundly. In other words, in a pluralist society where religion is no longer a matter of tradition, social indoctrination, or self-evident truth, Christians are invited to live by faith alone (*sola fide*)—to put their trust in that which they cannot prove. Thus, with another reference to Luther, the crucial question becomes not *what* they believe but *in whom* they believe. Berger finds this Lutheran understanding of Christianity "more persuasive than many others" (11).

The ensuing essays engage with Berger's two-pronged challenge: the question of "secular space" and its claim of neutrality, and the relativizing influence of pluralism. In the first four essays, the emphasis lies on the first challenge.

Bruce Wearne disagrees with Berger about the possibility of a neutral sociology and the necessity for Christian scholars to divide their lives between "secular" and "Christian" interests. He defends a Christian sociology, mostly on the basis of a Dooyeweerdian analysis of the presumed neutrality of science. At best, however, his contribution is an argument for the *possibility* of a Christian social science, and a rather abstract argument at that. This chapter would have gained weight if it had offered some examples of what Christian sociology looks like, and how it makes a difference.

A more interesting point is made by theologian Roger Olson, who agrees with Berger on most issues but challenges him where Berger argues for the internalization of secular spaces in the minds of the faithful. Berger claims that the coexistence of believers and non-believers is possible only when believers respect the secular (neutral) character of the state and accept secular spaces in their own consciousness. In other words—or so Olson reconstructs Berger's message—believers are expected to operate in their public, political lives as if God does not exist. Berger derives this claim from what it means to participate in society on a daily basis. After all, even the saints would call a mechanic when their cars didn't start. Against this, Olson argues that allowing freedom to those who don't share one's worldview does not need to be based on the acceptance of secular space. It may very well be based on strong *theological* convictions about seeing the world as God's world and human beings as his creatures. Similarly, calling a mechanic to repair your car does not mean that you have accepted—even if only for the moment—a secular worldview. For many believers, and certainly for the saints, the world is always in God's hands, and the wisdom that is found there is a fruit of his providential care. Making prudent use of seemingly natural laws does not constitute thinking or acting "as if God does not exist," says Olson, referring to the classic theological notion of secondary causes. Olson's point is fair and square. However, in defense of Berger one might say that from a *sociological* point of view religious people do seem to move between religious and secular domains and ways of reasoning. And

Berger is probably right that for many believers this leads to relativization of faith or a practical atheism in large sectors of life. In other words, the challenge is to interiorize this theological view of secular wisdom and to help believers develop a more sacramental worldview on the level of daily experience. Here, the liturgical and spiritual aspects of faith should be taken more seriously.

The authors of the following chapters are two political scholars: Paul Brink and James Skillen. Their contributions focus on the secular space that is commonly seen as the necessary neutral ground for political debate in liberal societies.

Brink argues that the pluralistic character of our nations is difficult to reconcile with this secular space. In the background lies, of course, Rawls's view of justice which problematizes the different worldviews that citizens may have and opts instead for a "neutral" political discourse that is derived from our shared political tradition. Brink argues that, rather than being neutral, this in fact puts liberal citizens firmly in a privileged position. A genuinely pluralist political theory would disestablish *everyone*, including liberalists and secularists. Further, a pluralist politics would abandon the idea of a society-wide moral consensus, either of the majority or of a theoretical construction by (liberal) political scientists. Rather than focusing on why people believe certain things (and ruling out certain worldviews as "illiberal"), a liberal state might focus on what people say about the political order, and invite them to defend this with the best and most plausible arguments they know—including religious arguments. Although this would take place within the limits of certain basic rules, such as rejecting violence and accepting majority rule, it would not depend on the pretension of secularity as neutral ground.

In his contribution, Skillen observes (following Nicholas Wolterstorff) that it is impossible for many believers to distinguish between their private beliefs and public convictions. Thus, he argues, Berger overlooks the significance of the religiously deep roots of conflicts in our world. Rather than mitigating these conflicts, secularism, as a worldview, adds to them. The expansion of secular space is therefore not neutral, but it creates the question of who should control public life and on what basis the boundary between the religious and the secular should be defined. This may amount to overtheorizing, as Berger seems to connect the secular with scientific and technological reasoning rather than worldview issues. In Berger's sociological approach it seems the secular is mostly the domain of the mundane where humans make decisions based on technological arguments and common sense rather than theology. He explicitly distinguishes this from secularism as a laicist ideology, a distinction that Skillen seems not prepared to make. Probably, Berger would argue that even those believers who find their faith relevant for public and political life would

take most of their decisions in that realm (e.g., road construction, or financial issues) on the same basis as most other citizens. That said, Skillen raises a fair point—although political rather than sociological—asking how governments can do justice to all life views, including those views which do not keep faith "private." With somewhat different applications (for example, on the funding of education), Skillen's argument for a "principled pluralism" is not so different from Brink's.

The next four chapters engage with Berger's idea of pluralism as relativization of religion. Thomas Howard presents the case of the development of Hindu nationalism in the deeply pluralistic context of India. One could say that Howard's chapter illustrates Berger's thesis that pluralism may also provoke backlash fundamentalism, especially in a context where equal rights for non-majority worldviews are becoming more common.

Part of the debate on pluralism is the increasing awareness that the construction of societies is partly based on our construction of gender. Ruth Groenhout discusses the issue of female anger and how this is perceived both within and outside the church. Christian women may feel caught between the devil and the deep blue sea as members of the church and of a modern society where often different—but also unexpectedly similar—ideas exist about the "proper" role of women.

Gender roles in a changing society is also the topic of Ruth Melkonian-Hoover's contribution on evangelical women in Brazil. Pluralism has opened spaces for these women between traditional female submission and active leadership, without taking away all the problems women face in exploring these new spaces. Often, it seems, women are accepted in roles of leadership as long as they keep their traditional responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Yet they also experience more support from their husbands and other members of the family of faith. In this sense there is some real change, although women still have to negotiate between traditional machismo (often supported by the church) and the emphasis on individual liberty of the modern world. Melkonian-Hoover offers a fascinating insight into how Brazilian evangelical women cope with these tensions theologically and through the support systems of their faith communities. Nevertheless, they keep struggling with ongoing forms of marginalization.

Finally, Kaye Cook, Si-Hua Chang, and Taylor-Marie Funchion take on Berger's thesis of relativization most directly and empirically. Their topic is the values of recent Brazilian and Chinese immigrants in the United States, and how they negotiate the tensions between their traditional backgrounds and the pluralist culture of their new society. The researchers found that the im-

migrants retain markers of their traditional culture, but mixed in with markers from their contemporary culture and their religious beliefs. Also, their faith has become more personal and individualized. By and large this seems to confirm Berger's thesis that identities become more fluid in a pluralist context.

Altogether, this series of essays is a worthy tribute to the life and work of a great scholar. The essays offer mostly interesting and challenging philosophical and empirical perspectives, all from a confessional Christian point of view. They are accessible to a wider audience.

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